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SUBJECT: RELIGION IN SENEGAL-IBADU RAHMAN, THE SALAFISTS

Classified By: DCM JAY T. SMITH FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) This is the first in a series of cables analyzing religion in Senegal. While the country is 95 percent Sunni Muslim, major differences exist between the various brotherhoods that dominate the Sunni-Sufi landscape which includes smaller, more conservative Sunni groups and Shia Muslims. Added to the mix is the role played by Catholics and small Protestant Christian groups of various denominations. Senegal has long been proud of its tolerance for all religions and its people reject the fundamentalism of Osama Bin Laden or Wahabbism. This first cable is about Cemaat Ibadu-Rahman which is considered to be one of the country's more conservative groups. End Summary.

2. (C) Founded in 1973 by a group of young men who wanted to practice a more pure and orthodox Islam, Cemaat Ibadu Rahman takes its name from Verse 25 of the Koran and means that they are Servants of the Merciful. According to the group's current leader, Emir Dia, the name is meant to reflect in a nutshell the mission of the organization and its conformity to traditional dogma. Cemaat refers to a sense of community. During a meeting at their headquarters in the city of Thies, Emir Dia was accompanied by members of the organization's Directorate consisting of Moussa Fall, who works for the Ministry of Education, Mohammed Diop, who is retired from the state electricity company Senelec and Pape Gali Sarr who works at the Ministry of Finance. Moussa Fall, said that much of the organization's decisions are taken by consensus and that, for example, the Emir could have seen Poloff by himself but choose to invite his colleagues so that we may get the broadest possible views. In his expose of the organization, Emir Dia underlined that the goal of Ibadu Rahman is to turn Senegal into a society that closely adheres to traditional Islamic teaching, although he does not want the country to have an Islamic government - a paradox, since Sharia does not distinguish one from the other. He lamented that in the beginning they were soundly rejected by the country's leading groups but that today they have become accepted in the country's religious spectrum: At first the Brotherhoods would have nothing to do with us. Now we are accepted. In fact, whenever they have any major events such as the Magal (a major religious festival that the Mourides hold in celebration of the return to Senegal of Amadou Bamba, the founder of Mouridism) we are invited. They come to our events. I think they have understood that we are not a threat to their position within the society.8

We used to be more rigid, but not anymore

3. (C) Emir Dia underlined that today's Ibadu is much less stringent and rigid than when it was founded in the

seventies: &We realized that if we were going to attract more followers and greater support from the public, we needed to refine our message. We still believe that many Senegalese are not practicing Islam in the way it should be and we remain committed to living our lives in accordance with the teachings of the prophet. As a result, our focus is to reach the people through education to teach them the proper forms of Islam.⁸ Ibadu Rahman has 11 primary and middle schools throughout the country. Two are in Dakar, 2 in Thies, 1 in Rufisque, 1 in St Louis, 1 in Louga, 1 in Kaolack, 1 in Mbour, 1 in Ziguinchor, and one is a boarding school in Sebikotane that receives students from neighboring countries such as Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso. &I'd like to point out that many of our students are the sons and daughters of prominent Mourides and Tidjane leaders who realize that we give a quality religious and secular education. So you see, we are not that far out of the mainstream as some would suggest.⁸ said the Emir.

Two Islams

¶4. (C) Emir Dia commented that while many Senegalese proudly consider themselves to be &believers,⁸ the lack of a decent religious education in state-run schools means that many of them get much of their information about Islam via teachers known as Marabouts. He remarked that Senegal is composed of two worlds that do not mix with another. One is the world of the secularist whose knowledge of Islam is basic at best and the other is the world of Islam based on an Arabic instruction of the Koran. Ibadu Rahman's original founders were students who had studied in Algeria. Ibadu Rahman

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proposes that religion in Senegal needs to be revitalized to lead people to learn the true tenets of Islam: &Muslims in Senegal are not mature and do not know their religion. In fact, they know the genealogies of their marabouts better than the dogma or teachings of the prophet. The Brotherhoods' form of Islam is about control. This is insufficient. For example, when we tried to organize an event to study the life of the wife of the Prophet, the Mourides said that we should do one celebrating the wife of Amdou Bamba. These are the kinds of intellectual problems that we face. So we must continue our work. We understand that this will take time. We are in no hurry.⁸ When asked if these brotherhoods were in fact engaging idolatry by elevating their founders to the same level as the Prophet, the Emir demurred but smiled as if in agreement. So while they want to seem that they are friendly with the brotherhoods it is clear that they consider them to be misguided.

Rejection of Jihad

¶5. (C) Moussa Fall characterizes his own group as being globalist. He sees Islam as a single holistic entity with the Cemaat in the center and the Suras as the doctrine of guidance. Emir Dia and Fall both emphasized the apolitical nature of their group, although they did support President Wade in 2000. They strongly rejected the doctrine of violence as espoused by Bin Laden. In reply, Poloff asked why groups such as Ibadu Rahman who say they are anti-violence stay on the sidelines while Bin Laden and Al Qaeda send young men and women to kill innocent people, most of whom are Muslim women and children. Emir Dia replied that Al Qaeda was misguided and argued that the main problem for the moderates was that they lacked a centralized leadership that could serve to coordinate their activities. He also claimed that, by not approving what Al Qaeda did, they were showing their disapproval.

Outside Influences?

¶6. (C) In a discussion with Professor Mamadou Ndiaye, of the Arabic Studies Department at Cheikh Anta Diop University, he characterized Ibadu Rahman as being a Salafist group of the bin Laden strain. This a charge that Emir Dia is aware of and one which Moussa Fall strongly rejected. Ndiaye underlined that as far as he knows Ibadu Rahman is not a violent organization and that their battle was an intellectual one. However, he warned that groups such as Ibadu Rahman represented a new trend of Islam in Senegal, a trend that espouses a more traditional form of Islam and that is becoming increasingly attractive to the youth. He went on to say that Saudi Arabia was particularly focused on increasing the number of African students who attend the Islamic University of Medina. Ndiaye said that after these students come back they are given funds to set up mosques or run programs. Ndiaye said that he has also noted an increase in the number of mosques organized around Emir Dia and Ibadu Rahman. He then accused the Saudi Embassy in Dakar of directly funding some of these groups. In contrast, Emir Dia specifically complained to Poloff that US foreign policy has led to the drying up of funds from the Middle East as the Treasury Department was targeting charitable groups that used to be very generous in their support.

¶7. (C) A Similar view was echoed by Ibrahima Badiane, Secretary-General of the Islamic Institute of Dakar, who said of Ibadu Rahman: &They are less spicy than when they were set up. They have changed over time as they realized that Senegalese were not buying into their message. In the early days, they only appealed to those students who had come back from studying abroad and who wanted to dissociate themselves from the brotherhoods. Also, there has been a generational shift. They are lot softer now. That being said, their view of Islam resembles a plant. They interpret Islam without deviation. It goes from the roots straight to the flower while ignoring the branches. They always refer to the roots and thus cannot accept that Islam needs reform or that certain things can be open to interpretation. For them, Islam is constant.⁸ He went on to say that another problem for fundamentalist groups is that they lack charismatic leaders to really spread the word: "In the past, they used to be much more well-organized and well-known but now they are largely banal and generally ignored by the public. And since they are non-violent, they seldom enter the public consciousness."

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Comment

¶8. (C) In the context of Senegal's religious landscape Ibadu Rahman, it looks like it will remain a marginal group that people have come to accept, but who many also feel are too strict in their interpretation of Islam. They will continue to occupy more of a niche space. Most of their outreach activities will focus on education and helping the poor. It is clear that the leadership of the group understands that they will have an extremely tough time breaking down the dominance of the brotherhoods and that they face multiple challenges, especially in the light of Senegal's more syncretic form of Islam. While Ibadu Rahman are definitely on the more conservative end of the religious spectrum, this group is unlikely to resort to violence to achieve their stated purpose of turning Senegal into an Islamic society.

End Comment.

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